Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 53

Reverie

1

It was Saturday and she knew there were a lot of things a girl her age could be doing, there were so many memories and happy moments filling this room I am in trying to stay awake. I sat up rubbing the last of sleep out her eyes trying to savor the last bit of sweetness she had behind her eyelids. It had been a lovely and sweet dream and right before it had it is a wonderful ending her Mom burst through with her bright idea, of her being too young and innocent.

Sometimes... you know how to show a girl an enjoyable time. Said Mary.

I will take either of those over your snoring. I had an enjoyable time too. But I always do when I am with you. He spoke. She also then replayed- I DO NOT SNORE. And if I do... it is very ungallant of you to point it out. You are no gentleman Mr.

-And-

...You are in the Deep South too! Said, Marry.

I have never claimed to be a gentleman... Merry... and I think I have demonstrated that point to you on numerous occasions. I am not intimidated by your SHOUTY capitals. But I will

confess to a small white lie: No… you do not snore… but you do talk. And it is fascinating.

What happened to my kiss?

Holy shit I thought. I know I talk in my sleep. Katie has told me enough times. What have I said? Oh no.

So-o… What did I just say?

No kisses for you until you talk! You are not a gentleman, as I thought, you are a cad and a scoundrel… it would be most ungallant of me to say… and I have already been chastised for that. But if you behave yourself… I may tell you this evening. I do have to go to a meeting

now. Baby, I will be seeing you... The RICHARD C. MAST... meaning the big chief executive officer, the highest-ranking person in a company or other institution, responsible for making managerial decisions. OMG! THE-RICHARD C. MAST... Cad and Scoundrel... ...Undertaking Department Inc. Right! Jeez-la-Wez-z- I shall maintain radio silence until this evening. I fume. Supposing I have said I hate him... or worse still... that I love him... in my sleep.

Like- could be hanging with her friends at the mall, or she could stay at home making drawings or doing homework; That is what Marry thought

smiling to herself, and that made every minute spent even more special over him being so confusing.

My mom has decided on gazpacho soup and a barbecue with steaks marinated in olive oil... garlic... and lemon. RICHARD C. MAST likes meat... and it is simple to do. Bob has volunteered to man the BBQ grill. What is it about men and fire...? I ponder as I trail after my mother through the supermarket with the shopping cart.

As we browse the raw meat cabinet... my phone rings. I scramble for

it… thinking it may be RICHARD C. MAST. I do not recognize the number.

‘Hello?’ I answer breathlessly. ‘Marry Sue?’ ‘Yes- I said.’ ‘It’s Elizabeth Morgan from Systematic Investment’ ‘Oh… hello.’

‘I’m calling to offer you the job of assistant to Mr. Jack Hyde. We’d like you to start on Monday.’ ‘Wow- I said. That is great! Thank you!’

‘You know the salary details?’ ‘Yes- Yes… that’s… I mean… I accept your offer. I’d love to come and work for you.’ ‘That is excellent, we- I will see you on Monday at 9:35 a. m.?’ ‘See you then, and

goodbye. And thank you.’ I beam at my mom. ‘You have a job?’

I nod gleefully... and she squeals and hugs me in the middle of a public supermarket.

‘Congratulations... darling! We have to buy some champagne!’ She is clapping her hands and jumping up and down. Is she forty...? Two or twelve?

I glance down at my phone and frown... there are a missed call from RICHARD C. MAST. He never phones me. I call him straight back.

‘Merry...' he answers immediately.

‘Hi…' I murmur shyly.

‘I have to return to NY. Something comes up. I am on my way to Hilton Head now. Please apologize to your mother… I can’t make dinner.’ He sounds very businesslike.

‘Nothing serious… I hope?’

‘I have a situation which I have to deal with. I will see you on Friday. I’ll send Peter to collect you from the airport if I can’t come myself.’ He sounds cold. Angry even. But for the first time… I do not immediately think it is me. 'Okay. I hope you sort out your situation. Have a safe flight.’

‘You too... baby...' he breathes... and with those words... my RICHARD C. MAST is back briefly. Then he hangs up.

Oh no. The last ‘situation’ he had was my virginity. Jeez... I hope it is nothing like that.

I gaze at my mom. Her earlier jubilation has metamorphosed into concern.

‘It’s RICHARD C. MAST... he’s had to go back to NY. He apologizes.’

‘Oh! That is a shame... darling. We can still have our barbecue... and now we have something to celebrate... your new job! You have to tell me all about it.’

It is a late afternoon... and Mom and I are lying beside the pool. My mother has relaxed to the point where she is horizontal now that Mr. Megabucks is not coming to dinner. As I lie in the sun... endeavoring to lose the pale... I think about yesterday evening and breakfast today. I think about RICHARD C. MAST... and my ridiculous grin refuses to subside. It keeps creeping across my face... unbidden and disconcerting... as I recall our various conversations and what we did… what he did.

Her body remained facing forward in deep thoughts, but she leaned ever so slightly into his direction to his

picture on her nightstand table; there seems to be a tidal shift in RICHARD C. MAST's attitude. He denies it but… he admits he is trying for more. What could have changed? What has altered since he sent his long email and when I saw him yesterday? What has he done?

I sit up suddenly… almost spilling my Dr. Pepper.

He had dinner with… her. Elly. Holy Freak! My scalp prickles on my plate, at the realization of needing him always. Did she say something to him I do not want him looking or talking to anyone- I want him all to me. Oh… to

have been a fly on the wall during their dinner. I could have landed in her soup or on her wine glass and choked her. ‘What is it... Merry... honey?’ Mom asks... startled from her torpor. ‘I’m just having a moment... Mom. What time is it?’

‘About 6:30 p. m... darling.’

Hm-m… he will not have landed yet. Can I ask him? Should I ask him? Or she has nothing to do with it. I fervently hope so. What did I say in my sleep? Crap… some unguarded remark while dreaming about him... I bet? Whatever it is... or was... I hope the sea of change is

coming from within him and not because of her.

I am sweltering in this damned heat. I need another dip in the pool. As I get ready for bed… I switch on my computer.

I have heard nothing from the RICHARD C. MAST. Not even a word that he arrived safely. Thinking of his voice deep and raspy, and me sometimes, almost emotionless, demanding answers I felt bad about me being me- She fought against the goosebumps that threatened to raise on her skin as she turned her head towards him thought of him.

Oh… I hope not. I am not ready to tell him that… and I am so- sure he is not ready to hear it… if he ever wants to hear it. I scowl at my computer and decide that whatever I cook… I will make bread.

(Time has passed)

She opened her eyes then, turning her body towards photo- why do I get to torture myself like this? Her mother nodded her confidence that had been there earlier was beginning to fade. Fear and determination gripped them that her mom was right about everything. I am starting to worry. I sent a text message- 'Please let me know that you have arrived

safely, and I am thinking of you.' She closed her eyes, trying to calm her heart, yet reveling in the feelings he caused within her. She brought her bottom lip between her teeth... They were nearly touching yet it was just a photo she was kissing missing him, and she came close to pulling him to her heart, finding out if he felt as good as he did in her mind, that was off in link for the time being. Her eyes were slightly glazed- lovesick, and he could only guess- to what she was doing at that very moment, that it was more from desire than they could take.

Three minutes later... I hear the ping from my email inbox. I was thinking-

about getting it... my mind racing- If he only really knew I was 12, in eighth grade, and it was a school night if only he knew he was my dream man- and my dreams in my mind and out. I was taking my nightly shower upstairs- now in the only bathroom- I was wet and my mom was in the next room wanting me to get done and be done. like me wanting now to go downstairs watch some TV before 10:00 p.m. The bathroom had one small window- were the boy next door I am sure like to look in at me, and the fan was not able to keep up with the humidity- so everything was steamy, so the door was left open a crack- do not care anymore

about my nakedness, after being F*UCKED by him- at only 12- yet I said I was of age- when we bathed or showered afterward too. It had been that way since forever- after the first time.

When the show on TV ended, it was my bedtime and I went upstairs. The hall was dark, but I did not bother turning on the light. The door to my room was in the middle of the hallway, on the left. The door to the bathroom was at the end of the hallway, on the right. As I approached my room, there was a movement in the bathroom that caught my attention thinking I should pee one last time- and change my tampon. The door was open a

bit wider than usual, but I did not seem to care as if I was like a woman.

More likely, it was puberty torturing me with its omnipresent sense for the opposite sex- not having to go through what I do. I stood in the doorway to my room, but I did not turn on the light. I knew everyone would not be able to see me in the dark if I stayed out of the line of brightness cast by the bathroom light onto the hallway wall. That tells me I knew from the start that what I was doing was wrong.

What I was doing was watching myself, naked, fresh from the shower,

rubbing moisturizing lotion on myself again. I could not see much of it in the glass, and only the side yet it was more than I could take, but by moving my head a little this way and that I was able to keep one of my breasts in vision.

The sexual and it was far more than my fantasies coming true, reading the text, at the same time; Dear Miss Marry- I have arrived safely... and please accept my apologies for not letting you know. I do not want to cause you any worry... it is heartwarming to know that you care for me. I am thinking of you too and as ever looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.

Sexual pleasure, she was feeling her nipples now, pinching them lightly then harder and then pulling on them and shaking her small tits in wonderful waves of flesh. I was wearing drawstring pants with an elasticized waist. Without conscious thought, I pulled the bow out of the drawstring, slipped my hand inside the waistband, and began stroking myself with my open palm. Erect nipple in perfect profile I give Snapchats back. I sigh… RICHARD C. MAST is back to formality- yet SO- HOT! I start to daydream even more.

My hand slide over her ribs and her belly and down, out the sight of me

and the thoughts of him with me as he was before.

The thought of what she was going to do was more than I could bear. I opened my legs a step, turning slightly and I could see the hair between my legs.

The crack was fully open- to my bothers looking in there a bed in the next room, now and I wanted them to know- in the door they stood- I rarely saw anyone- yet this time- I did, there and when I did, it troubled me- if I looked too long- yet it was a new turn on now so in love and not care about felling shame- the shame of loving me was gone.

I pressed my fingers into 'her' the mysteriousness. With no effort, the fingers slipped inside until I could not see them at all. I shut my eyes and froze my hand, afraid to move- as my mom walks past and said nothing. I could not cum out here- just over a text message.

It must have only taken her a second for me to let out. I have climaxed as soon as I touched my clitoris after just removing the unseen fingers. The door opens as wide as me, flooding the hallway with light from the lit bathroom. I stepped out, bathrobe on but open. I was caught. I stared at them all- feeling like a woman- they stared back- not saying a word. I

pulled my robe off. I burst into tears- like a girl. It was the first time I had cried since last night- I spun around, sobbing, 'I’m sorry, I’m sorry,' and went inside my room. I slammed the door closed and left the light off- now feeling the shame.

Dear Mr...

It is very evident that I care for you deeply more than you would even know in deepness. How could you doubt that- ever? I hope your ‘situation’ is at hand.

Your Marry XO, PS: Are you going to tell me what I said in my sleep? Dear Miss- Marry, I like very much that

you care about me. The ‘situation’ here is not yet resolved. Concerning your PS: The answer is... No.

I hope it was amusing. But you should know I cannot accept any responsibility for what comes out of my mouth when I am unconscious. You misheard me. A man of your advanced years is usually a little deaf. I now on my phone whispering

Asking- Sorry... could you speak up? I cannot hear you. So now it was back to him in my mind and then in my dreams.

Then it was said- I intend to do exactly that on Friday evening. Looking so forward to it!

I would rather hear you say the words that you uttered in your sleep when you are conscious... that is why I will not tell you. Go to sleep. You will need to be rested with what I have in mind for you tomorrow.

(Goodnight-)

2

Dark shadows of exasperating. I clamber into bed and lie glaring at the ceiling as my eyes adjust to the dark. I hear another ping from my computer. I

am not going to look. No not. No… I am not going to look. Gah! Like the fool I am… I cannot resist the lure of RICHARD C. MAST's words.

-And-

My mother hugs me tightly.

‘Follow your heart… darling… and please… please… try not to over… think things. Relax and enjoy yourself. You are so young… sweetheart. You have so much of life to experience yet… just let it happen. You deserve the best of everything.’ Her heartfelt words are comforting whispered in my ear.

She kisses my hair.

‘Oh… Mom.’ Hot… unwelcome tears prick my eyes as I cling to her.

‘Darling… you know what they say. You have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find your prince.’

I give her a lopsided… bittersweet smile.

‘I think I’ve kissed a prince… Mom- like- I hope he doesn’t turn into a frog.’ She gives me her a- most endearing… motherly… absolute… Unconditional….love smile… and I marvel at the love I feel for this woman as we hug again.

‘Merry… they’re calling your flight…' dad’s voice is anxious.

‘Will you visit… Mom?’

‘Of course, darling… soon. Love you.’

‘Me too.’

Her eyes are red with unshed tears as she releases me. I hate leaving her. I hug dad… and turning… head to the gate… I do not have time for the first-class lounge today. I will myself not to glance back. But I do… and Bob is holding my mom… and tears are streaming down her face. I can no longer hold mine back. I put my head down and proceed to the

gate... keeping my eyes on the shiny... white floor... blurred through my watery tears.

Once onboard... in the luxury of first-class... was in my mind of the woman I could become- and never have to work- I curl up in my bed in dreaming and try to compose myself.

It is always painful to wrench myself away from Mom even after moments like moments before… she is scatty... disorganized... but newly insightful... and she loves me.

Unconditional love… what every child deserves from their parents. I frown at my wayward thoughts… and pulling out my iPhone… stare at it despondently.

What does RICHARD C. MAST know of love? Seems he did not get the unconditional love he was entitled to during his exceedingly early years.

My heart twists… and my mother’s words waft like a zephyr through my mind: Yes… Merry. Hell… what do you need? … a neon sign flashing on his forehead? She thinks RICHARD C. MAST loves me… but then she is my mother… of course she would think that.

She thinks I deserve the best of everything. I frown. It is true... and in a moment of startling clarity... I see it. It is amazingly simple: I want his love. I need RICHARD C. MAST... to love me. Therefore, I am so reticent about our relationship... because on some basic... fundamental level... I recognize within me a deep... seated compulsion to be loved and cherished.

-And-

Because of his Dark Shadows... I am holding myself back. The bondage, discipline (or domination), sadism, and masochism, is a distraction from the real

issue. Yet, I love him! So, I will take it like a woman, not a girl!

The sex is amazing… he is wealthy… he is beautiful… but this is all meaningless without his love… and that is what I want the most- is love and slow and caring- and the real heart… fail is that I do not know if he is capable of love? I question everything I have done.

He does not even love himself. I recall his self… loathing… her love being the only form he found… acceptable. Punished… whipped… beaten… whatever their relationship entailed… he feels undeserving of love. Why does he feel like

that? How can he feel like that? His words haunt me: ‘It’s extremely hard to grow up in a perfect family when you’re not perfect.’

I close my eyes… imagining his pain… and I cannot begin to comprehend it. I shudder as I remember that I may have divulged too much. What have I confessed to RICHARD C. MAST in my sleep? What secrets have I revealed?

I stare at the phone in the future hope's that it will give me some answers about what I need to do for him to love me more than he does. Much unsurprising or not… it is not very

forthcoming. As we have not taken off yet... I decided to email my Dark Shadows that creep in my mind.

(Time passes)

I am once again ensconced in first-class... on lavish dates and balls parties, for which I- thank you. I am counting the minutes until I see you this evening... and find the deeper truth out of you about my nocturnal admissions of falling ever-so for you and need feeling as I want.

'Pull down your pantyhose and underwear.' At first, he did not seem to be doing anything. His long perfect finger

poked my stomach. 'I told you I’m not going to f*ck you. Do what I say.' I pulled down my underwear and pantyhose. The skin on my face and throat was hot and pink like below and above, but my fingertips were cold and icy on my legs as I did what he asked. I thought I might faint or spit up, but I did not. So many feelings of suspension dizzying me, like the one I have in dreams where I can fly like angles, but only if I get into some weird position as he has me in now. I became aware of a small frenzy of expended energy behind me.

My hips were sprayed with hot sticky muck the dream was over- too

soon. 'Go clean yourself off,' he said. Stickiness- I thought as I stood slowly and shyly- and felt my skirt fall of goo. Now pulling underwear pantyhose back up since I was going to use the bathroom anyway and need to. He did not close the door behind me- looking at me on the pot, and the second unusual thing occurred- I had blended orgasms- I could come back to the bedroom and masturbate on his bed and then go back to my room- like a good girl- then he would love me more- and never- ever- stop.

(I did not hear from him in a week)

The aircraft doors are still open- he not happy. You may stow your twitchy palm for now. We are delayed but only by ten minutes. My welfare and that of the passengers around me is vouchsafed. I miss you and your smart mouth missy. 'I am safely homework is over for now.'

They are shutting the doors as we walk down the tarmac. You will not hear another peep from me about work or formalities... especially given your deafness of me telling some work beneath me off- about time- and the sin of not making it.

I switch off the phone he has given me... unable to shake my anxiety for the moments of being a young girl and falling into his arms like a child. Something is up with him I just know.

I switch off the Phone... unable to shake my anxiety. Something is up with the RICHARD C. MAST. Perhaps ‘the situation’ is out of hand. Glancing up at the locker where my bags are stowed in my school day. Then- I sit back... in class in a daydream. I- Marry this morning... with my mother’s help... to buy the RICHARD C. MAST a small gift to say thank you for first-class and the gliding.

I smile at the memory of the soaring and the love I have never hand or felt... that was something else to me and still is.

I do not know yet if I will give my silly gift to him. He might think it is childish... and if he is in a strange mood... not. I am both eager to return and apprehensive of what awaits me at my journey's end. As I mentally flick through all the scenarios that could be 'the situation'... I become aware that once again the only empty seat is beside me. I shake my head as the thought crosses my mind that RICHARD C. MAST might have purchased the adjacent seat so that I

could not talk to anyone. I dismiss the idea as ridiculous... no one could be that controlling... that jealous... Surely- I close my eyes as the stifling air balloon taxis towards the runway.

I emerge into the Sea... Tac arrivals terminal eight hours later to find Peter waiting and holding up a board that reads Miss A Merry. Honestly! But it is good to see him.

3

‘Hello... Peter- just outside the classy 1930's antique limousine.’

‘Miss Merry...' he greets me formally... but I see a hint of a smile in his sharp brown eyes.

He looks his usual immaculate self... smart charcoal suit... white shirt... and gray tie.

‘I do know what you look like Peter... you don’t need a board... and I do wish you’d call me... Merry.’

‘Merry- please-Can I take your bags...?’ ‘No... I can Marry. Thank you.’ His lips tighten perceptibly.

‘But... if you’d be more comfortable taking them...' I stammer.

‘Thank you.’ He grabs my backpack and my newly acquired wheelie case for the clothes my mother has bought me.’ This way… ma’am.’

I sigh- lightly- He is so polite. I remember… though I would like to erase it from my memory… that this man has bought me underwear. In fact, and the thought unsettles me… he is the only man who is ever bought me underwear. We walk in silence to the blackness outside in the airport parking lot… and he holds the door open for me. I clamber in… wondering if wearing such a short skirt for the return to NY was a clever idea

when I only have two days before- I need to back home.

It was cool and welcome to the Modern city. Here I feel exposed. Once Peter has stowed my bags in the trunk...

The journey is slow... caught up in rush hour traffic. Peter keeps his eyes on the road ahead. I can bear the silence no longer, taciturn does not begin to describe him.

‘How’s is the... Peter?’

‘Mr... is preoccupied... Miss Merry.’

Oh… this must be ‘the situation.’ I am mining a seam of gold.

‘Preoccupied?’

‘Yes… ma’am.’

I frown at Peter… and he glances at me in the rear… view mirror… our eyes meet in the glass of the car. He is saying no more. Jeez… he can be as tightlipped as the control freak himself.

‘Is he okay?’

‘I believe so… ma’am.’

‘Are you more comfortable calling me… Miss Merry?’

‘Yes… ma’am.’

‘Oh… okay.’

Well… that curtails our conversation… and we continue in silence. I begin to think that Peter’s recent slip… when he told me that he had been hell on wheels… was an anomaly. He is embarrassed about it… worried that he has been disloyal. The silence is suffocating.

‘Could you put some music on please?’

‘Certainly… ma’am. What would you like to hear?’

‘Something soothing.’

I see a smile play on Peter's lips as our eyes meet briefly again in the mirror.

'Yes... ma'am.'

He pushes a few buttons on the steering wheel... and the gentle strains of Pachelbel's canon fill the space between us. Oh yes… this is what I need.

'Thank you.' I sit back as we drive slowly but steadily along the I... 5 a.m. and in NY.

Twenty... five minutes... later he drops me outside the impressive façade that is the entrance to his mansion.

‘In- you go… ma’am…' he says… holding the door open for me.’ I’ll mention your luggage is.’ The expression is soft… warm… avuncular even.

Jeez… Uncle Peter… what a thought.

‘Thank you for meeting me.’

‘It’s a pleasure… Miss Merry.’ He smiles… and I head into the building. The door attendant nods and waves.

As I ride up to the thirtieth floor… a thousand butterflies stretch their wings and flutter erratically in my stomach. Why am I so nervous?

-And-

I know it is because I have no idea what kind of mood RICHARD C. MAST's going to be in when I arrive. My inner goddess is hopeful for one type of mood... my subconscious... like me... is fraught with nerves.

The elevator doors open... and I am in the foyer. It is so strange not to be met by Peter. Of course, he is parking the car. In the great room... RICHARD C. MAST is on his Phone talking quietly as he stares out of the glass doors at the early New York skyline.

He is wearing a white suit with the jacket undone... and he is running his hand through his gray-black hair... he is. He agitated... tense even.

Oh no... What is wrong? Agitated or not... he is still beyond beautiful. How can he look so… arresting? It’s such a pleasure to stand and drink in the sheer sight of him.' No Trace… Okay… Yes.’ He turns and sees me... and his whole demeanor changes. From tension to relief to something else: a look that calls directly to my inner goddess... a look of sensual carnality... gray eyes blazing.

My mouth goes dry and desires blooms in my body… whoa.

‘Keep me informed...' he snaps and shuts off his phone as he strides purposefully toward me. I stand paralyzed as he closes the distance between us... devouring me with his eyes. Holy shit… something is amiss... the strain in his jaw... the anxiety around his eyes. He shrugs out of his jacket... undoes his dark tie... and slings them both onto the coach en route to me. Then his arms are wrapped around me... and he is pulling me to him... hard... fast... gripping my ponytail to tilt my head up... kissing me as his life depends on it.

What? He drags the hair tie painfully out of my hair… but I do not care. There is a desperate… primal quality to his kiss. He needs me… for whatever reason… at this point… and I have never felt so desired and coveted. It is dark and sensual and alarming all at the same time. I kiss him back with equal fervor… my fingers twisting and fisting in his hair. Our tongues entwined… our passion and ardor erupting between us. He tastes divine… hot… sexy… and his scent… all body wash and RICHARD C. MAST is so arousing. He drags his mouth away from mine… and he is staring down

at me… gripped by some unnamed emotion.

‘What’s wrong?’ I breathe.

‘I’m so glad you’re back. Shower with me… now.’ I cannot decide if it is a request or a command.

‘Yes…' I whisper… and he grabs my hand… leading me out of the spacious room into his bedroom to his bathroom.

Once there… he releases me and sets the water running in the far too spacious shower.

Turning slowly… he gazes at me… eyes hooded.

‘I like your skirt. It is noticeably short...' he says... his voice low.’ You have great legs.’

He steps out of his shoes and reaches down to take each of his socks off... never taking his eyes off me. I am rendered speechless by the look of hunger in his eyes. Wow… to be this wanted by this Greek god. I mirror his actions and step out of my black flats. Suddenly... he reaches for me... backing me up against the wall. Kissing me... my face... my throat... my lips… running his hands into my hair. I feel the cool... smooth tiled wall at my back as he pushes himself against me so that I am flattened

between his heat and the chill of the ceramic. Tentatively... I place my arms on his upper arms... and he groans as I squeeze tightly.

‘I want you now. Here… fast... hard...' he breathes... and his hands are on my thighs... pushing up my skirt.’ Are you still bleeding?’ ‘No.’ I flush.

‘Good.’

His thumbs hook over my white cotton panties... and abruptly he drops to his knees as he tugs them off. My skirt is now rucked up so that I am naked from the waist down and panting... wanting. He grabs my hips... pushing me against the

wall again... and kisses me at the apex of my thighs. Grabbing my upper thighs... he forces my legs apart. I groan loudly... feeling his tongue circling my clitoris. Oh my. Tipping my head back involuntarily... I moan as my fingers find their way into this hair.

His tongue is relentless... strong and insistent... leaving me... swirling round and round... repeatedly... no... stop. It is exquisite... the intensity of feeling... it is almost painful. My body starts to quicken... and he releases me. What? No! My breathing is ragged as I pant... gazing at him with delicious anticipation. He grabs my face with both hands... holding

me firmly... and he kisses me hard... thrusting his tongue into my mouth so I can taste my arousal.

Unzipping his fly... he frees himself... grabs the backs of my thighs... and lifts me.

‘Wrap your legs around me... baby...' he commands... his voice urgent... strained.

I do as I am told and wrap my arms around his neck... and he moves

quickly and sharply... filling me. Ah! He gasps... and I groan. Holding my

behind... his fingers digging into my soft flesh... he begins to move... slowly at first... a steady even tempo... but as his control unravels... he speeds up... faster... and faster. Ah-h! I tip my head back and concentrate on the invading... punishing... heavenly sensation... pushing me... pushing me... onward... higher... up... and when I can take no more... I explode around him... spiraling into an intense... all... consuming orgasm. He lets go with a deep growl... and he buries his head in my neck as he buries himself inside me... groaning loudly and incoherently as he finds his release.

His breathing is erratic... but he kisses me tenderly... not moving... still inside me... and I blink... unseeing into his eyes. As he comes into focus... he gently pulls out of me... holding me steady while I place my feet on the floor.

The bathroom is now cloudy with steam… and hot. I feel overdressed.

‘You seem pleased to see me...' I murmur with a shy smile.

His lips quirk up.

‘Yes... Miss Merry... My pleasure is self... evident. Come... let me get you in the shower.’

He undoes the next three buttons of his shirt... removes the cufflinks... tugs it over his head... and discards it on the floor. Removing his suit pants and boxer briefs... he kicks them to one side. He begins to undo the buttons on my blouse while I watch him... yearning to reach out and stroke his chest... but I contain myself.

‘How was your journey?’ he asks mildly. He seems so much calmer now... his apprehension gone... dissolved by sexual congress.

‘Fine... thank you...' I murmur... still breathless. ’Thanks once again for

the first class. It is a much nicer way to travel.’ I smile shyly at him. ‘I have some news...' I added nervously.

‘Oh?’ he looks down at me as he undoes the last button... slips me

blouse down my arms... and throws it on top of his discarded clothes.

‘I have a job.’

He stills... then smiles at me... his eyes warm and soft.

‘Congratulations... Miss Merry. Now, will you tell me where?’ He teases.

‘You don’t know?’

He shakes his head… frowning slightly.

‘Why would I know?’

‘With your stalking capabilities… I thought you might have…’ I trail off as his face falls.

‘Merry… I wouldn’t dream of interfering in your career… unless you ask me to… of course.’ He looks wounded.

‘So, you have no idea which company?’

‘No. I know there are four publishing companies in NY… so I am assuming it’s one of them.’

‘SIP’

‘Oh… the small one… good. Well done.’ He leans forward and kisses my forehead.

‘Clever girl. When do you start?’

‘Monday.’

‘That soon… eh? I had better take advantage of you while I still can. Turn around.’

I am thrown by his casual command… but do as I am bid… and he undoes my bra and unzips my skirt. He pushes my skirt down… cupping my behind as he does… and kissing my

shoulder. He leans against... I and his nose nuzzle my hair... inhaling deeply. He squeezes my buttocks.

‘You intoxicate me... Miss Merry... and you calm me. Such a heady combination.’ He kisses my hair. Grabbing my hand... he tugs me into the shower.

‘Ow...' I squeal. The water is practically scalding. RICHARD C. MAST grins down at me as the water cascades over him.

‘It’s only a little hot water.’

And he is right. It feels heavenly... washing off the sticky Modern

city morning and the stickiness from our lovemaking.

‘Turn around...' he orders... and I comply... turning to face the wall.’ I want to wash you...' he murmurs and reaches for the body wash. He squirts a little into his hand.

‘I have something else to tell you...' I murmur as his hands start on my shoulders.

‘Oh... yes?’ he asks mildly.

I steel myself with a deep breath.

‘My friend José’s photography show is opening Thursday in Portland.’

He stills... his hands hovering over my breasts. I have emphasized the word ‘friend.’ ‘Yes... what about it?’ He asks sternly and too harshly.

‘I said I would go. Do you want to come with me?’

After what feels like a monumental amount of time... he slowly starts washing me again.

‘What time?’

‘The opening is at 7:30 p. m.’ He kisses my ear.

‘Okay.’

Inside my subconscious relaxes and then collapses... slumped into an old, battered armchair.

‘Were you nervous about asking me?’

‘Yes. How can you tell?’

‘Merry... your whole bodies just relaxed...' he says dryly.

‘Well... you just are um… on the jealous side.’

‘Yes... I am...' he says darkly.’ And you would do well to remember that.

But thank you for asking. We’ll take Charlie Tango.’

Oh… the helicopter of course… silly me. More flying… cool! I grin.

‘Can I wash you?’ I ask.

‘I don’t think so…' he murmurs… and he kisses me gently on my neck to take the sting out of his refusal. I pout at the wall as he caresses my back with soap.

‘Will you ever let me touch you?’ I ask boldly.

He stills again… his hand on my behind.

‘Put your hands on the wall Merry. I’m going to take you again…' he

murmurs in my ear as he grabs my hips... and I know that the discussion is over.

Later we are seated at the breakfast bar... dressed in bathrobes...

having consumed Mrs. Jones rather than excellent pasta alle vongole.

'More wine?' RICHARD C. MAST asks... gray eyes glowing.

'A small glass... please.' The Sancerre is crisp and delicious. RICHARD C. MAST pours one for me and one for himself.

‘How’s the um… the situation that bought you to NY?’ I ask tentatively. He frowns.

‘Out of hand…' he murmurs bitterly.’ But nothing for you to worry about… Merry. I have plans for you this evening.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes. I want you ready and waiting in my playroom in fifteen minutes.’ He stands and gazes down at me.

‘You can get ready in your room. Incidentally… the walk… in the closet is now full of clothes for you. I don’t want

any arguments about them.’ He narrows his eyes… daring me to say something. When I do not… he stalks off to his study.

Me! Argue? With you… Dark Shadows? It is more than my backside’s worth. I sit on the barstool… momentarily stupefied… trying to assimilate this morsel of information. He bought me clothes. I exaggeratedly roll my eyes knowing full well he cannot see me. Car… phone… computer… clothes… it will be a damn condominium next… and then I really will be his lover.

Ho yes! My subconscious has her snarky face on. I ignore her and make my

way upstairs to my room so… it is still mine… why? I thought he had agreed to let me sleep with him. I suppose he is not used to sharing his personal space… but then… neither am I. I console myself with the thought that at least I have somewhere to escape from him.

Examining the door… It has a lock but no key. I wonder briefly if Mrs. Jones has a spare. I will ask her. I open the closet door and close it again quickly. Holy Crap… he is spent a fortune. It resembles Katie's… so many clothes hanging neatly on the rail. Deep down… I know that they will all fit. But I have no time to think about that… I must get

kneeling in the Black and White Room of-Pain… or Pleasure… hopefully this evening.

Kneeling by the door… I am naked except for my panties. My heart is in my mouth. Jeez… I thought of the bathroom he would have had enough. The man is insatiable… or all men are like him. I have no idea… no one to compare him to. Closing my eyes… I try to calm myself down… to connect with my inner sub. She is there somewhere… hiding behind my inner goddess.

Anticipation runs bubbling like soda through my veins. What will he do? I

take a deep steadying breath… but I cannot deny it… I am excited… aroused… wet already. This is so… I want to think wrong… but somehow, it is not. It is right for RICHARD C. MAST. It is what he wants… and after the last few days…, he has done… I must be brave and take whatever he decides he wants… whatever he thinks he needs.

The memory of his look when I came in this evening… the longing in his face… his determined stride toward me like I was an oasis in the desert. I would do anything to see that look again. I press my thighs together at the delicious memory… and it reminds me that I need

to spread my knees. I shuffle them apart. How long will he make me wait? The wait is crippling me...

crippling me with a dark and tantalizing desire. I glance around the subtly lit room; the cross... the table... the couch... the bench… that bed. It looks so large... and it is made of pink satin sheets. Which piece of apparatus will he use?

The door opens and RICHARD C. MAST breezes in... ignoring me completely. I glance down quickly... staring at my hands... positioned with care on my spread thighs. Placing something on the large chest beside the

door... he strolls casually toward the bed. I indulge myself in a quick glimpse at him... and my heart lurches to a stop.

He is naked except for those soft ripped jeans... top button casually is undone and then there at his feet. Jeez... he looks so freaking hot. My subconscious is frantically fanning herself... and my inner goddess is swaying and writhing to some primal carnal rhythm. She is so ready. I lick my lips instinctively. My blood pounds through my body... thick and heavy with salacious hunger. What is he going to do to me?

Turning… he nonchalantly walks back to the chest of drawers.

Opening one… he begins to remove items and place them on the top. My curiosity burns… blazes even… but I resist the overwhelming temptation to sneak a quick peek. When he finishes what he is doing… he comes to stand in front of me. I can see his naked feet… and I want to kiss every inch of them… run my tongue over his instep… suck each of his toes. Holy shit.

‘You look lovely…' he breathes.

I keep my head down… conscious that he is staring at me while I am naked.

I feel the flush as it slowly spreads over my face. He bends down and cups my chin… forcing my face up to meet his gaze.

‘You are one beautiful woman… Merry. And you’re all mine…' he murmurs. ’Stand up.’ His command is soft full of sensual promise.

Shakily… I get to my feet.

‘Look at me…' he breathes… and I stare up into his smoldering gray gaze. It is his Dom gaze… cold… hard… and sexy as hell… seven shadows of sin in one enticing look. My mouth dries… and I know I will do anything he asks.

An almost cruel smile plays across his lips.

‘We don’t have a signed contract… Merry. But we’ve discussed limits.'

-And-

I want to re… iterate we have safe words… 'okay?’

Holy freak… what has he got planned that I need safe words?

‘What are they?’ he asks authoritatively.

I frown slightly at his question… and his face hardens perceptibly.

‘What are the safe words… Merry?’ he says slowly and deliberately.

‘Yellow…' I mumble.

‘And?’ he prompts… his mouth set in a hard line.

‘Red…' I breathe.

‘Remember those.’

And I cannot help it… I raise my eyebrow at him and am about to remind him of my GPA… but the sudden frosty glint in his icy gray eyes stops me in my tracks.

‘Don’t start with your smart mouth in here… Miss Merry. Or I will-

freak it with you on your knees. Do you understand?’

I swallow instinctively. Okay. I blink rapidly… chastened. Actually… it’s his tone of voice… rather than the threat… that intimidates me.' Well?’

‘Yes… Sir…' I mumble hastily.

‘Good girl…' he pauses as he stares at me.’ My intention is not that you should safely word because- you are in pain. What I intend to do to you will be intense. Very intense… and you must guide me. Do you understand?’ Not really. Intense? Wow.

‘This is about touch… Merry. You will not be able to see me or hear me. But you’ll be able to feel me.’

I frown… not hear him? How is that going to work? He turns… and I had not noticed that above the chest is a sleek… flat… matt… black box. As he waves his hand in front… the box splits in half: two doors slide open revealing a CD player and a host of buttons. RICHARD C. MAST presses several of these buttons in sequence. Nothing happens… but he seems satisfied. I am mystified. When he turns to face me again… he wears his small I… have… a… secret smile.

‘I am going to tie you to that bed… Merry. But I am going to blindfold you first and…' he reveals his iPod in his hand…’ you will not be able to hear me. All you will hear is the music I am going to play for you.’

Okay. A musical interlude… not what I was expecting. Does he ever do what I expect?

Jeez… I hope it is not rap.

‘Come.’ Taking my hand… he leads me over to the antique Hugh Hefner Naked Lady covered bed. There are shackles attached at each corner… fine

metal chains with leather cuffs... glinting against the pink satin.

Oh boy... My heart is going to leave my chest... and I am melting from the inside out... desire coursing through me. Could I be any more excited?

'Stand here.'

I am facing the bed. He leans down and whispers in my ear.

'Wait here... keep your eyes on the bed. Picture yourself lying here bound and totally at my mercy.' Oh my.

He moves away for a moment... and I can hear him near the door fetching something. All my senses are hyper-alert... my hearing acuter.

He is picked up something from the rack of whips and paddles by the door.

Holy cow. What is he going to do?

I feel him behind me. He takes my hair... pulls it into a ponytail behind me... and starts to braid it.

'While I like your pigtails... Merry... I am too impatient to beat you right now. So, one will have to do.' His voice is low... soft.

His deft fingers skim my back occasionally as they work down my hair... and each casual touch is like a sweet... electric shock against my skin. He fastens the end with a hair tie... then gently tugs the braid so that I am forced to step back flush against him. He pulls again to the side so that I angle my head... giving him easier access to my neck. Leaning down... he nuzzles my neck. Tracing his teeth and tongue from the base of my ear to my shoulder. He hums softly as he does... and the sound resonates through me. Right down... right down there... inside me. Unbidden... I groan quietly.

‘Hush now...' he breathes against my skin. He holds up his hands in front of me... his arms touching mine. In his right hand is a flogger. I remember the name from my first introduction to this room.

‘Touch it...' he whispers... and he sounds like the devil himself. My body flames in response. Tentatively... I reach out and brush the long strands.

It has many long fronds... all soft suede with small beads at the end.

‘I will use this. It will not hurt... but it will bring your blood to the surface of your skin and make you overly sensitive.’ Oh... he says it will not hurt.

‘What are the safe words… Merry?’ ‘Um… yellow and red… Sir…' I whisper.

‘Good girl. Remember… most of your fear is in your mind.’ He drops the flogger on the bed… and his hands move to my waist.

‘You won’t be needing these…' he murmurs and hooks his fingers into my panties and sweeps them down my legs. I step unsteadily out of them… supporting myself on the ornate post of the bed.

‘Stand still…' he orders… and he kisses my behind and then gently nips me twice… making me tense.’ Now lie down.

Face up...' he adds as he smacks me hard on the behind... making me jump.

I crawl onto the bed’s hard... Hastily... unyielding mattress and lie down... looking up at him. The satin of the sheet beneath me is soft and cool against my skin. His gaze is impassive... except for his eyes which glow with a barely leashed excitement.

‘Hands above your head...' he orders... and I do as I am bid.

Jeez... my body hungers for him. I want him already.

He turns... and out of the corner of my eye... I watch him saunter back

over to the chest of drawers... returning with the iPod and what looks like an eye mask... like the one I used on my flight to Atlanta. The thought makes me want to smile... but I cannot quite make my lips cooperate. I am too consumed with anticipation. I just know my face is completely immobile... my eyes huge... as I gaze at him.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed... he shows me the iPod. It has a strange antenna device as well as headphones. How odd. I frown as I try to figure this out.

‘This transmits what’s playing on the iPod to the system in the room.’... RICHARD C. MAST answers my unspoken query as he taps the small antenna.’ I can hear what you’re hearing... and I have a remote-control unit for it.’ He smirks his private... joke smile and holds up a small... flat device that looks like a very hip calculator. He leans across me... inserting the earbuds gently into my ears... and puts the iPod down somewhere on the bed above my head.

‘Lift your head...' he commands... and I do so immediately.

Slowly... he slides the mask on... pulling the elastic over the back of my head... and I am blind. The elastic on the mask holds the earbuds in place. I can still hear him... though the sound is muffled as he rises from the bed. I am deafened by my breathing... it is shallow and erratic... reflecting my excitement. RICHARD C. MAST takes my left arm... stretches it gently to the left... hand corner... and attaches the leather cuff around my wrist. His long fingers stroke the length of my arm once he is finished. Oh! His touch elicits a delicious... tickly shiver. I hear him move slowly round to the other side... takes my right arm and

cuffs it. Again… his long fingers linger along my arm.

Oh, my yes… I am fit to burst already. Why is this so erotic?

He moves to the bottom of the bed and grabs both of my ankles.

‘Lift your head again…' he orders.

I comply… and he drags me down the bed so that my arms are stretched out and almost straining at the cuffs. Holy cow… I cannot move my arms. A frisson of trepidation mixed with tantalizing exhilaration sweeps through my body… making me wetter. I groan. Parting my legs… he cuffs first my right ankle and

then my left so I am staked out... spread... eagled... and vulnerable to him. It is so unnerving that I cannot see him. I listen hard… what is he doing? And I hear nothing... just my breathing and the pounding thud of my heart as blood pulses furiously against my eardrums.

Abruptly... the soft silent hiss and pop of the iPod springs into life. From inside my head... alone angelic voice sings unaccompanied a long sweet note... and it is joined almost immediately by another voice... and then more voices... Holy cow... a celestial choir... singing acapella in my head... an ancient... ancient hymnal. What in heaven’s name is this? I have

never heard anything like it. Something unbearably soft brushes against my neck... running languidly down my throat... slowly across my chest... over my breasts... caressing me... pulling at my nipples... it is so soft... skimming underneath. It is so unexpected. It is fur! It a large feather?

RICHARD C. MAST trails his hand... unhurried and deliberate... down to my belly... circling my bellybutton... then carefully from hip to hip... and I am trying to anticipate where he is going next... but the music... it is in my head... transporting me... the fur across the line of my pubic hair... between my legs...

along with my thighs... down one leg… up the other… it tickles… but not quite… more voices join… the heavenly choir- all singing various parts... their voices blending blissfully and sweetly together in a melodic harmony that is beyond anything I have ever heard. I catch one word...' Deus'... and I realize they are singing in Latin. And still... the fur is moving down my arms and around my waist… back up across my breasts.

My nipples harden beneath the soft touch… and I am panting… wondering where his hand will go next. Suddenly... the fur is gone... and I can feel the fronds of the flogger flowing over my

skin… following the same path as the fur… and it is so hard to concentrate on the music in my head… it sounds like a hundred voices singing… weaving an ethereal tapestry of fine… silken gold and silver through my head… mixed with the feel of the soft suede against my skin… trailing over me… oh my… abruptly… it disappears. Then suddenly… sharply… it bites down on my belly.

‘A-aggh-h!’ I cry out. It takes me by surprise… and it does not exactly hurt… but tingles all over… and he hits me again. Harder.

‘A-ah!’

I want to move… to writhe… to escape… or to welcome… each blow… I do not know… it is so overwhelming… I cannot pull my arms… my legs are stuck… I am held very firmly in place… and again he strikes across my breasts… I cry out.

4

-And-

It is a sweet agony… bearable… just… pleasant… no… not immediately… but as my skin sings with each blow in perfect counterpoint to the music in my head… I am dragged into a dark… dark part of my psyche that surrenders to this

most erotic sensation. Yes... I get this. He hits me across my hip. Then... he moves in swift blows over my pubic hair... on my thighs... and down my inner thighs… and back up my body… across my hips.

He keeps going as the music reaches a climax... and then suddenly... the music stops. And so-o does he. Then the singing starts again… building and building... and he rains down blows on me… and I groan and writhe. Once again... it ceases and all is quiet… except my wild breathing… and wild yearning. For… oh… what is happening? What is he going to do now? The excitement is

almost unbearable. I have entered a very dark... carnal place.

The bed moves and shifts as he clambers over me... and the song starts again. He has it on repeat... this time it is his nose and lips that take the place of the fur... running down my neck and throat... kissing... sucking... trailing down to my breasts... Ah! Taunting each of my nipples in turn... his tongue swirling around one while his fingers relentlessly tease the other... I groan... loudly I think... though I cannot hear. I am lost. Lost in him... lost in the astral... seraphic voices... lost to all the sensations I cannot escape... I am

completely at the mercy of his expert touch.

He moves down to my belly... his tongue circling my navel... following the path of the flogger and the fur... I moan. He is kissing, sucking, and nibbling... moving south... and then his tongue is there. At... at the junction of my thighs. I throw my head back and cry out as I almost detonate into orgasm... I am on the brink... and he stops.

No! The bed shifts... and he kneels between my legs. He leans toward the bedpost... and the cuff on my ankle is

suddenly gone. I pull my leg to the middle of the bed… resting it against him. He leans over to the opposite post and frees my other leg. His hands travel quickly down both my legs.

Squeezing and kneading...

bringing life back into them. Then... grasping my hips... he lifts me so that my back is no longer on the bed. I am arched... resting on my shoulders. What? He is kneeling up between my legs… and in one swift... slamming move he is inside me… oh, freak… and I cry out again like a little girl that I am. I quiver hard of my impending orgasm begins... and he stills.

The quiver never dies… oh-he is going to give it to me even further in deepness.

‘Please!’ I wail.

He grips me harder… in warning? I do not know… his fingers digging into the flesh of my behind as I lay panting… so I purposefully still. Very slowly… he starts to move again… out and then in… agonizingly slowly. Holy freak… Please! I am screaming inside…

-And-

As the number of voices in the choral piece increases… so does his pace… infinitesimally… he is so

controlled… so in time with the music. And I can no longer bear it.

‘Please…' I beg… and in one swift motion… he lowers me back onto the bed… and he is lying on top of me… his hands on the bed beside my breasts as he supports his weight… and he thrusts into me… as the music reaches its climax… I fall… free fall… into the most intense… agonizing orgasm I have ever had… and RICHARD C. MAST follows me… thrusting hard into me… three more times… finally stilling… then collapsing on top of me.

As my consciousness returns from wherever it has been... RICHARD C. MAST pulls out of me. The music has stopped... and I can feel him stretch across my body as he undoes the cuff on my right wrist. I groan as my hand is freed. He quickly frees my other hand... gently pulls the mask from my eyes... and removes the earbuds. I blink in the dim soft light and stare up into his intense gray gaze.

‘Hi...' he murmurs.

‘Hi... yourself...' I breathe shyly back at him. His lips quirk up into a

smile... and he leans down and kisses me softly.

‘Well done... you...' he whispers.’ Turn over.’

Holy freak... what is he going to do now? His eyes soften.

‘I’m just going to rub your shoulders.’

‘Oh… okay.’

I roll stiffly onto my front. I am so tired. RICHARD C. MAST sits astride me and starts to massage my shoulders. I groan loudly... he has such strong...

knowing fingers. Leaning down… he kisses my head.

‘What was that music?’ I mumble inarticulately.

He giggles- and thing 1960's-

‘It was… overwhelming.’

‘I’ve always wanted to freak to it.’

‘Not another first… Mr…?’

‘Indeed… Miss Merry.’

I groan again as his fingers work their magic on my shoulders.

‘Well… it’s the first time I’ve freaked to it… too…' I murmur sleepily.

‘Hmm… you and I… we’re giving each other many firsts.’ His voice is a matter… of… fact.

‘What did I say to you in my sleep… Ch… err… Sir?’ His hands pause their ministrations for a moment.

‘You said lots of things… Merry-You talked about cages and strawberries… that you wanted more… and that you missed me.’ Oh… thank heavens for that.

‘Is that all?’ The relief in my voice is evident.

RICHARD C. MAST stops his heavenly massage and shifts so that he is

lying beside me. His head up like his one elbow. He’s frowning.' What did you think you’d said?’ Oh crap.

‘That I thought you were ugly… conceited… and that you were hopeless in bed.’ He creases his brow deepens.

‘Well… naturally I am all those things… and now you’ve got me intrigued. What are you hiding from me… Miss Merry?’ I blink at him innocently.

‘I’m not hiding anything.’

‘Merry… you are a hopeless liar.’

‘I thought you were going to make me giggle after sex... this isn’t doing

it for me.’ His lips quirk up.’ I can’t tell jokes.’

‘Mr...! Something you can’t do?’ I grin at him... and he grins back.

‘No... hopeless joke teller.’ He looks so proud of himself that I start to giggle.

‘I’m a hopeless joke teller too...'

‘That is such a lovely sound...' he murmurs... and he leans forward and kisses me.

‘And you are hiding something… Merry. I may have to torture it out of you.’

I wake with a jolt. I think I have just fallen down some stairs in a dream… and I bolt upright… momentarily disorientated. It is dark… and I am in RICHARD C. MAST’s bed alone. Something has woken me… some nagging thought. I glance over at the alarm clock on his bedside. It is 5:00 in the morning… but I feel rested.

Why is that? Oh… it is the time difference… it would be 8:00 a. m. in a

Modern city. Holy crap… I need to take my pill. I clamber out of bed… grateful for whatever it is that has woken me. I can hear faint notes from the piano. RICHARD C. MAST is playing. This I must see. I love watching him play. Naked… I grab my bathrobe from the chair and wander quietly down the corridor… slipping on my robe and listening to the magical sound of the melodic lament that is coming from the great room.

5

Shrouded in darkness… RICHARD C. MAST sits in a bubble of light as he plays… and his hair glints with

burnished copper highlights. He looks naked… though I know he is wearing his PJ bottoms. He is concentrating… playing beautifully… lost in the melancholy of the music. I hesitate… watching from the shadows… not wanting to interrupt him. I want to hold him. He looks lost… sad even… and achingly lonely… or it is just the music that is so full of poignant sorrow. He finishes the piece… pauses for a split second… then starts to play it again. I move cautiously toward him… drawn like the moth to the flame… the idea makes me smile.

He glances up at me and frowns before his gaze returns to his hands Oh

crap... is he pissed off that I am disturbing him?

‘You should be asleep...' he scolds mildly.

I can tell he is pre... occupied with something.

‘So, should you...' I retort not as mildly.

He glances up again... his lips twitching with a trace of a smile.

‘Are you scolding me... Miss Merry?’

‘Yes... Mr... I am.’

‘Well… I can’t sleep.’ He frowns once more like a trace of irritation or anger flashes across his face. With me? Surely not.

I ignore his facial expression and very bravely sit down beside him on the piano stool… placing my head on his bare shoulder to watch his deft… agile fingers caress the keys. He pauses fractionally… and then continues to the end of the piece.

What was that?’ I ask softly.

Something, I have been working on-

‘I’m always interested in what you do.’

He turns and softly presses his lips against my hair.

‘I didn’t mean to wake you.’

‘You didn’t. Play the other one.’

-Love story-

He starts to play slowly and deliberately. I feel the movement of his hands in his shoulder as I lean against him and close my eyes. The sad… soulful notes swirl slowly and mournfully around us… echoing off the walls. It is a hauntingly beautiful piece… sadder even

than the Chopin… and I lose myself to the beauty of the lament. To a certain extent… it reflects how I feel. The deep poignant longing I must know this extraordinary man better… to try and understand his sadness. All too soon… the piece is at an end.

‘Why do you only play such romantic music?’

I sit upright and gaze up at him as he shrugs in answer to my question… his expression was wary.

‘So, you were just six when you started to play?’ I prompt.

He nods... his wary look intensifying. After a moment he volunteers.

‘I threw myself into learning the piano to please my new mother.’

‘To fit into the perfect family?’

‘Yes... so to speak...' he says evasively.’ Why are you awake? Don’t you need to recover from yesterday’s exertions?’

‘It’s 8:00 in the morning for me. And I need to take my pill.’ He raises his eyebrows in surprise.

‘Well remembered...' he murmurs... and I can tell he is impressed.

His lips quirk up in a half-smile.

‘Only you would start a course of time... specific birth control pills in a different time zone. You should wait for half an hour and then another half-hour tomorrow morning.

So, eventually, you can take them at a reasonable time.’

‘Good plan...' I breathe.’ So, what shall we do for half an hour?’ I blink innocently at him.

I can think of a few things...' he grins... gray eyes bright. I gaze back impassively as my insides clench and melt under his knowing look.

‘On the other hand, we could talk...' I suggest quietly.

His brow creased.

‘I prefer what I have in mind.’ He scoops me onto his lap.

‘You’d always rather have sex than talk...' I laugh... steadying myself by holding on to his upper arms.

‘True. Especially with you.’ He nuzzles my hair and starts a steady trail

of kisses from below my ear to my throat. ‘Maybe on my piano...' he whispers.

Oh my- my whole body tightens at the thought- Piano and his many talents- in all thing's art! Likewise- being the literary agent of the writer with ‘The Longest Novel in the 21st century.’

Wow!!!

‘I want to get something straight...' I whisper as my pulse starts to accelerate... and my inner goddess closes her eyes... reveling in the feel of his lips on me.

He pauses momentarily before continuing his sensual assault.

‘Always so eager for information… Miss Merry. What needs straightening out?’ he breathes against my skin at the base of my neck… continuing his soft gentle kisses.

‘Us…' I whisper as I close my eyes.

‘Hmm. What about us?’ He pauses his trail of kisses along with my shoulder.

‘The contract.’

He lifts his head to gaze down at me… a hint of amusement in his eyes… and sighs. He strokes his fingertips down my cheek.

‘Well… The contract is moot… don’t you?’ His voice is low and raspy… his eyes soft.

‘Moot?’

‘Moot.’ He smiles. I gape at him quizzically.

‘But you were so keen.’

‘Well… that was before. Anyway… the Rules aren’t moot… they still stand.’ His expression hardens slightly.

‘Before? Before what?’

‘Before…'… He pauses… and the wary expression is back… 'more.’ He shrugs.

‘Oh.’

‘Besides… we’ve been in the playroom twice now… and you haven’t run screaming for the hills.’

Do you expect me to?’

‘Nothing you do is expected… Merry…' he says dryly.

‘So… let me be clear. You just want me to follow the Rules element of the contract all the time but not the rest of the contract?’

‘Except in the playroom. I want you to follow the spirit of the contract in the playroom… and yes… I want you to

follow the rules… all the time. Then I know you'll be safe… and I'll be able to have you anytime I wish.'

'And if I break one of the rules?'

'Then I'll punish you.'

'But won't you need my permission?'

'Yes… I will.'

'And- if I say no?'

He gazes at me for a moment… with a confused expression.

'If you say no… you'll say no. I'll have to find a way to persuade you.'

I pull away from him and stand. I need some distance. He frowns as I stare down at him. He looks puzzled and wary again.

‘So, the punishment aspect remains.’

‘Yes... but only if you break the rules.’

‘I’ll need to re... read them...' I say... trying to recall the details.

‘I’ll fetch them for you.’ His tone is suddenly businesslike.

Whoa. This has gotten serious so quickly. He rises from the piano and

walks lithely to his study. My scalp prickles. Jeez... I need some tea. The future of our so... called relationship is being discussed at 4:44 in the morning when he is pre... occupied with something else... is this wise? I head into the kitchen which is still shrouded in darkness. Where are the light switches? I find them... flick them on... and pour water into the kettle. My pill! I rummage in my purse that I left on the breakfast bar and find them quickly. One swallow... and I am done. By the time I finish... RICHARD C. MAST is back... sitting on one of the bar stools... watching me intently.

‘Here you go.’ He pushes a typed piece of paper toward me… and I noticed that he had crossed some things out.

RULES

Obedience:

The Submissive will obey any instructions given by The Dominant immediately without hesitation or reservation and in an expeditious manner. The Submissive will agree to any sexual activity deemed fit and pleasurable by the Dominant excepting those activities which are outlined in hard limits (Appendix A).

She will do so eagerly and without hesitation.

Sleep:

The Submissive will ensure she achieves a minimum of eight seven hours of sleep a night when she is not with the Dominant.

Food:

The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and wellbeing from a prescribed list of foods (Appendix 4). The Submissive will not snack between meals… except for fruit.

Clothes:

While with The Dominant... The Submissive will wear clothing only approved by the Dominant. The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for The Submissive... which The Submissive shall utilize. The Dominant shall accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis.

Exercise:

The Dominant shall provide the Submissive with a personal trainer four three times a week in an hour... long sessions at times to be mutually agreed between the personal trainer and The Submissive. The personal trainer will

report to The Dominant on The Submissive's progress.

Personal Hygiene/Beauty:

The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or always waxed. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon of The Dominant's choosing at times to be decided by The Dominant... and undergo whatever treatments the Dominant sees fit.

Personal Safety:

The Submissive will not drink to excess... smoke... take recreational drugs or put herself in any unnecessary danger.

Personal Qualities:

The Submissive will not enter any sexual relations with anyone other than the Dominant. The Submissive will always conduct herself respectfully and modestly. She must recognize that her behavior is a direct reflection of the Dominant. She shall be held accountable for any misdeeds... wrongdoings and misbehavior committed when not in the presence of the Dominant.

Failure to comply with any of the above will result in immediate punishment... the nature of which shall be determined by the Dominant.

‘So, the obedience thing still stands?’ ‘Oh… yes.’ He grins.

I shake my head amused… and before I realize it… I roll my eyes at him.' Did you just roll your eyes at me… Merry?’ He breathes.

Oh, freak.

‘Possibly… depends on what your reaction is.’

‘Same as always…' he says… shaking his head slightly… his eyes alight with excitement.

I swallow instinctively and a frisson of exhilaration runs through me.

‘So…’ Holy shit. What am I going to do?' Yes?’ He licks his lower lip.

‘You want to spank me now.’

‘Yes. And I will.’

‘Oh… really… Mr…?’ I challenge… grinning back at him. Two can play this game.

‘Are you going to stop me?’

‘You’re going to have to catch me first.’

His eyes widen a fraction… and he grins… slowly getting to his feet.

‘Oh… really… Miss Merry?’

The breakfast bar is between us. I have never been so grateful for its existence as at this moment.

‘And you’re biting your lip...' he breathes... moving slowly to his left as I move to mine.

‘You wouldn’t...' I tease.’ You roll your eyes.’ I try reasoning with him. He continues to move toward his left... as do I.

‘Yes... but you’ve just raised the bar on the excitement stakes with this game.’ His eyes blaze... and wild anticipation emeritus from him.

‘I’m quite fast you know.’ I try for nonchalance.

‘So am I.’

He is stalking me… in his kitchen.

‘Are you going to come quietly?’ he asks.

‘Do I ever?’

‘Miss Merry… what do you mean?’ he smirks.’ It’ll be worse for you to have to get you.’

‘That’s only if you catch me… RICHARD C. MAST. And right now, I have no intention of letting you catch me.’

‘Merry… you may fall and hurt yourself. Which will put you in direct contravention of rule number seven.’

‘I have been in danger since I met you… Mr… rules or no rules.’ ‘Yes, you have.’ He pauses… and his brow furrows slightly.

Suddenly… he lunges for me… making me squeal and run for the dining room table. I am Marry escape… putting the table between us. My heart is pounding and adrenaline has spiked through my body… boy… this is so thrilling. I am a child again… though that is not right. I watch him carefully as he

paces deliberately toward me. I inch away.

‘You certainly know how to distract a man… Merry.’ ‘We aim to please… Mr… Distract you from what?’ ‘Life. The universe.’ He waves one of his hands vaguely.' You did seem very pre… preoccupied as you were playing.’ He stops and folds his arms… his expression amused.

‘We can do this all day… baby… but I will get you… and it will just be worse for you when I do.’

‘No… you won’t.’ I must not be over… confident. I repeat this as a

mantra. My subconscious has found her Nikes... and she is on the starting blocks.

‘Anyone would think you didn’t want me to catch you.’

‘I don’t. That is the point. I feel about the punishment the way you feel about me touching you.’

His entire demeanor changes in a nanosecond. Gone is playful RICHARD C. MAST... and he stands to stare at me as if I had slapped him. He is ashen.

‘That’s how you feel?’ he whispers.

Those four words… and the way he utters them… speaks volumes.

Oh no. They tell me so much more about him and how he feels. They tell me about his fear and loathing. I frown.

No… I do not feel that bad. No way. Do I?

‘No. It doesn’t affect me quite as much like that… but it gives you an idea…' I murmur… staring anxiously at him.

‘Oh…' he says.

Crap, he looks completely and utterly lost... like I have pulled the rug from under his feet.

Taking a deep breath... I move around the table until I am standing in front of him... gazing into his apprehensive eyes.

‘You hate it that much?’ he breathes... his eyes filled with horror.

‘Well… no...' I reassure him. Jeez... that is how he feels about people touching him?

‘No. I feel ambivalent about it. I don’t like it... but I don’t hate it.’ ‘But last

night… in the playroom… you… ‘he trails off.

‘I do it for you… RICHARD C. MAST… because you need it. I do not. You did not hurt me last night. That was in a different context… and I can rationalize that internally… and I trust you. But when you want to punish me… I worry that you’ll hurt me.’

His gray eyes blaze like a turbulent storm. Time moves… and expands and slips away before he answers softly.

‘I want to hurt you. But not beyond anything that you couldn’t take.’ Freak!

‘Why?’

He runs his hand through his hair… and he shrugs.

‘I just need it.’ He pauses… gazing at me with anguish… and he closes his eyes and shakes his head.' I can’t tell you…' he whispers.

‘Can’t or won’t?’

‘Won’t.’

‘So, you know why.’

‘Yes.’

‘But you won’t tell me.’

‘If I do… you will run screaming from this room… and you’ll never- ever want to return.’ He stares at me warily.’ I can’t risk that… Merry.’

‘You want me to stay.’

‘More than you know. I couldn’t bear to lose you.’ Oh my.

He gazes down at me… and suddenly… he pulls me into his arms, and he is kissing me… kissing me passionately. It takes me completely by surprise… and I sensed his panic and desperate need in his kiss.

‘Don’t leave me. You said you would not leave me... and you begged

me not to leave you... in your sleep...' he murmurs against my lips.

Oh… my nocturnal confessions.

‘I don’t want to go.’ And my heart clenches... turning itself inside out.

This is a man in need. His fear is naked and obvious... but he is lost...

somewhere in his darkness. His eyes wide and bleak and tortured. I can soothe him. Join him briefly in the darkness and bring him into the light.

‘Show me...' I whisper.

‘Show you?’

‘Show me how much it can hurt.’

‘What?’

‘Punish me. I want to know how bad it can get.’ RICHARD C. MAST steps back away from me… completely confused. You would try?’

‘Yes. I said I would.’ But I have an ulterior motive. If I do this for him… he will let me touch him. He blinks at me.

‘Merry… you’re so confusing.’

‘I’m confused too. I am trying to work this out. And you and I will know…

finally... if I can do this. If I can handle this... then maybe you...'

My words fail me... and his eyes widen again. He knows I am referring to the touch thing. For a moment... he looks torn... but then a steely resolve settles on his features... and he narrows his eyes... gazing at me speculatively as if weighing up alternatives.

Abruptly... he clasps my arm in a firm grip and turns... leading me out-of-the great room... up the stairs... and to the playroom. Pleasure and pain... reward and punishment... his words from so long-ago echo through my mind like his

thoughts about me always having his way. Are you ready for this?’

‘I’ll show you how bad it can be... and you can make your mind up.’ He pauses by the door.’ I nod... my mind made up... and I am vaguely lightheaded... faint as all the blood leaves my face. Grabs what looks like a belt from the rack beside the door... He opens the door... and still grasping my arm... then leads me over to the red leather bench in the far corner of the room.

‘Bend over the bench...' he murmurs.

Okay. I can do this. I bend over the smooth soft leather. He left my bathrobe on. In a quiet part of my brain... I am vaguely surprised that he has not made me take it off. Holy freak this is going to hurt... I know. My subconscious has passed out... and my inner goddess is endeavoring to look brave.

‘We’re here because you said yes... Merry. And you ran from me. I am going to hit you six times... and you will count on me.’

Why doesn't he just get on with it? He always makes such a meal of

punishing me. I roll my eyes... knowing full well he cannot see me.

He lifts the hem of my bathrobe... and for some reason... this feels more intimate than being naked. He gently caresses my behind... running his warm hand all over both cheeks and down to the tops of my thighs.

‘I am doing this so that you remember not to run from me... and as exciting as it is... I never want you to run from me...' he whispers.

-And-

Like the irony is not lost on me. I was running to avoid this. If he had

opened his arms... I had run to him... not away from him.

And you rolled your eyes at me. You know how I feel about that.’ Suddenly... it had gone... that nervous edgy fear in his voice. He is back from wherever he has been. I hear it in his tone... in the way, he places his fingers on my back... holding me... and the atmosphere in the room changes.

I close my eyes... bracing myself for the blow. It comes hard... snapping across my backside... and the bite of the belt is everything I feared. I cry out

involuntarily… and take a huge gulp of air.

‘Count… Merry!’ he commands.

‘One!’ I shout at him… and it sounds like an expletive.

He hits me again… and the pain pulses and echoes along the line of the belt. Holy shit… that smarts.

‘Two!’ I scream. It feels so good to scream.

His breathing is ragged and harsh. Whereas mine is almost none… existent as I desperately scrabble around my psyche looking for some internal

strength. The belt cuts into my flesh again.

‘Three!’ Tears spring unwelcome into my eyes. Jeez... this is harder than I thought... so much harder than the spanking. He is not holding anything back.

‘Four!’ I yell as the belt bites me again... and now tears are streaming down my face.

I do not want to cry. It angers me that I am crying. He hits me again.

‘Five.’ My voice is more a choked... strangled sob... and at this moment... I hate him. One more... I can do

one more. My backside feels as if it is on fire.

‘Six...' I whisper as the blistering pain cuts across me again... and I hear him drop the belt behind me... and he is pulling me into his arms... all breathless and compassionate… and I want none of him.

‘Let go… no...’ And I find myself struggling out his grasp... pushing- him away. Fighting him.

‘Don’t touch me!’ I hiss. I straighten and stare at him... and he is- watching me as if I might bolt... gray eyes wide... bemused. I dash the tears angrily

out of my eyes with the backs of my hands… glaring at him.

‘This is what you like? Me… like this?’ I use the sleeve of the bathrobe to wipe my nose.

He gazes at me warily.

‘Well… you are one freaked… up the son of a bitch.’ ‘Merry…' he pleads… shocked.

Do not you dare… Marry me! You need to sort your shit out…!’

-And-

With that... I turn stiffly... and I walk out of the playroom... closing the door quietly behind me.

I clasp the door handle behind me and briefly lean back against the- door. Where to go? Do I run? Do I stay? I am so mad... angry scalding tears- spill down my cheeks... and I brush them furiously aside. I just want to curl up. Curl up and recuperate in some way. Heal my shattered faith. How could I have been so stupid? Of course, it hurts.

Tentatively... I rub my backside. Aah! It is sore. Where to go? Not his room. My room... or the room that will be

mine… no… is mine… was mine. Therefore, he wanted me to keep it. He knew I would need distance from him.

I launch myself stiffly in that direction… conscious that RICHARD C. MAST may- follow me. It is still dark in the bedroom… dawn only a whisper in the skyline. I climb awkwardly into bed… careful not to sit on my aching and tender backside. I keep the bathrobe on… wrapping it around me… and curl up and let go… sobbing hard into my pillow.

What was I thinking? Why did I let him do that to me? I wanted the dark… to explore how bad it could be… but it is

too dark for me. I cannot do this. Yet... this is what he does... this is how he gets his kicks.

What a monumental wake... up call. And to be fair to him... he warned me and warned me... repeatedly. He is not normal. He has needs that I cannot fulfill. I realize that now. I do not want him to hit me like that again... ever. I think of the couple of times he has hit me... and how easy he was on me by comparison. Is that enough for him? I sob harder into the pillow. I am going to lose him. He will not want to be with me if I cannot give him this. Why... why... why have I fallen in love with- The- Dark Shadows? Why? Why

can’t I love José… or Paul Clayton… or someone like me?

Oh… his distraught look as I left. I was so cruel… so shocked by the- savagery… will he forgive me… will I forgive him? My thoughts are all- haywire and jumbled… echoing and bouncing off the inside of my skull. My subconscious is shaking her head sadly… and my inner goddess is nowhere to be seen. Oh… this is a dark morning of the soul for me. I am so alone. I want my Mom. I remember her parting words at the airport…

Follow your heart… darling… and please… please… try not to over… think

things. Relax and enjoy. You are so young... sweetheart... you have so much to experience... just let it happen. You deserve the best of everything.

I did follow my heart... and I have a sore ass and an anguished... broken spirit to show for it. I must go. That is, it... I must leave. He is no good to me... and I am no good for him. How can we do this work? And the thought of not seeing him again practically chokes me… my lust for this man.

I hear the door click open. Oh no... He is here. He puts something- down on the bedside table... and the bed shifts

under his weight as he climbs- in behind me.

‘Hush...' he breathes... and I want to pull away from him... move to the- other side of the bed... but I am paralyzed. I cannot move and lie stiffly... not yielding at all. 'Don’t fight me... Merry... please...' he whispers. Gently... he pulls me into his arms... burying his nose in my hair... kissing my neck.

‘Don’t hate me...' he breathes softly against my skin... his voice- achingly sad. My heart clenches anew and releases a fresh wave of silent sobbing.

He continues to kiss me softly... tenderly... but I remain aloof and wary.

We lie together like this... neither saying anything for ages. He just- holds me... and very gradually... I relax and stop crying. Dawn comes and goes... and the soft light gets brighter as the morning moves on... and still we lie quietly.

‘I bought you some Advil and some arnica cream...' he says after a- long while.

I turn very slowly in his arms so I can face him. I am resting my head on his arm. His eyes are flinty gray and guarded.

I gaze at his beautiful face. He is giving nothing away... but he keeps his eyes on mine... hardly blinking. Oh... he is so breathtakingly good... looking. In such a brief time... he has become so... so dear to me. Reaching up... I caress his cheek and run the tips of my fingers through his stubble. He closes his eyes and exhales slightly.

‘I’m sorry...' I whisper.

He opens his eyes and looks at me puzzled.

‘What for?’

‘What I said.’

‘You didn’t tell me anything I didn’t know.’ And his eyes soften with relief.’

I am sorry I hurt you.’ I shrug.

‘I asked for it.’ And now I know. I swallow. Here goes. I need to say my piece.’ I don’t think I can be everything you want me to be...' I whisper. His eyes widen slightly... and he blinks... his fearful expression returning. 'You are everything I want you to be.’ What?

‘I don’t understand. I am not obedient... and you can be as I am not going to let you do that to me again. And that’s what you need... you said so.’

He closes his eyes again... and I can see a myriad of emotions cross his face. When he reopens them... his expression is bleak? Oh no.

‘You’re right. I should let you go. I am no good for you.’

My scalp prickles as every single hair follicle on my body stand to attention... and the world falls away from me... leaving a wide... yawning abyss for me to fall into. Oh no.

‘I don’t want to go...' I whisper. Freak... this is it. Pay or play. Tears swim in my eyes once more.

‘I don’t want you to go either…' he whispers… his voice raw. He reaches up and gently strokes my cheek and wipes away a falling tear with his thumb.’ I’ve come alive since I met you.’ His thumb traces the contours of my lower lip.

‘Me too…' I whisper…’ I’ve fallen in love with you… RICHARD C. MAST.’ His eyes widen again… but this time… with pure… undiluted fear. 'No…' he breathes as if I have knocked the wind out of him.

Oh no.

‘You can’t love me… Merry. No… that’s wrong.’ He is horrified.

‘Wrong? Why’s it wrong?’

‘Well… look at you. I can’t make you happy.’ His voice is anguished.

‘But you do make me happy.’ I frown.

‘Not now… not doing what I want to do.’

Holy freak. This is it. This is what it boils down to…

incompatibility… and all those poor subs come to mind.

‘We’ll never get past that… will we?’ I whisper… my scalp prickling in fear.

He shakes his head bleakly. I close my eyes. I cannot bear to look at him.

‘Well… I’d better go… then…' I murmur… wincing as I sit up.

‘No… don’t go.’ He sounds panicked.

‘There’s no point in me staying.’ Suddenly… I feel tired… really dog… tired… and I want to go now. I climb out of bed… and RICHARD C. MAST follows.

‘I’m going to get dressed. I’d like some privacy…' I say… my voice flat and empty as I leave him standing in the bedroom.

Heading downstairs... I glance at the living room... thinking how only hours before, I had rested my head on his shoulder as he played the piano.

So much has happened since then. I have had my eyes opened and glimpsed the extent of his depravity... and I now know he is not capable of love... of giving or receiving love. My worst fears have been realized. And strangely... it is very liberating.

The pain is such that I refuse to acknowledge it. I feel numb. I have somehow escaped from my body and am now a casual observer of this unfolding

tragedy. I shower quickly and methodically... thinking only of each second in front of me. Now squeeze the body wash bottle. Put the body wash bottle back in the rack. Rub the cloth on the face... on shoulders... on and on... all simple... mechanical actions... requiring simple mechanical thoughts.

I finish my shower... and as I have not washed my hair... I can dry myself quickly. I dress in the bathroom... taking my jeans and t... shirt out of my small suitcase. My jeans chafe against my backside... but quite frankly... it is a pain I welcome as it distracts my mind from

what is happening to my splintering... shattered heart.

I stoop to shut my suitcase... and the bag holding RICHARD C. MAST's gift catches my eye... a modeling kit for a Blahnik L23 glider... something for him to build. Tears threaten. Oh no… happier times... when there was the hope of more. I take it out of the case... knowing that I need to give it to him. Quickly... I rip a small piece of paper from my notebook... hastily scribble a note for him... and leave it on top of the box.

I gaze at myself in the mirror. A pale and haunted ghost stares' back at

me. I scoop my hair into a ponytail and ignore how swollen my eyelids are from the crying. My subconscious nods with approval. Even she knows not to be snarky right now. I cannot believe that my world is crumbling around me into a sterile pile of ashes... all my hopes and dreams cruelly dashed. No... No, do not think about it. Not now... not yet. Taking a deep breath... I pick up my case... and after placing the glider kit and my note on his pillow... I head for the great room.

RICHARD C. MAST is on the phone. He is dressed in black jeans and t... shirt. His feet are bare.

‘He said what!’ he shouts…

making me jump.’ Well… he could have told us the freaking truth. What is his number…? I need to call him… Welch… this is a real freak… up.’ He glances up and does not take his dark and brooding eyes off me. ’Find her…' he snaps and presses the off switch.

I walk over to the couch and collect my backpack… doing my best to ignore him. I take the Mac out of it and walk back toward the kitchen…

placing it carefully on the breakfast bar… along with the Phone and the car key.

When I turn to face him… he is staring at me… stupefied with horror.

‘I need the money that Peter got for my Beetle.’ My voice is clear and-calm… devoid of emotion… extraordinary.

‘Merry… I do not want those things… they are yours…' he says in disbelief.’ Please… take them.’

‘No RICHARD C. MAST… I only accepted them under sufferance… and I don’t want them anymore.’

‘Merry… be reasonable…' he scolds me… even now.

‘I don’t want anything that will remind me of you. I just need the money that Peter got in my car.’ My voice is quite monotonous.

He gasps.

‘Are you trying to wound me?’

‘No.’ I frown staring at him. Of course, not… I love you.’ I am not. I’m trying to protect myself…' I whisper. Because you do not want me the way I want you.

‘Please… Merry… take that stuff.’

‘RICHARD C. MAST… I do not want to fight… I just need the money.’

He narrows his eyes… but I am no longer intimidated by him. Well…

only a little. I gaze impassively back… not blinking or backing down.

‘Will you take a check?’ he says acidly.

‘Yes. I think you’re good for it.’

He does not smile… he just turns on his heel and stalks into his study. I take a last lingering look around his apartment… at the art on the walls… all abstracts… serene… cool… cold… even. Fitting… I think absently. My eyes stray to the piano. Jeez… if I had kept my mouth shut… we would have made love

on the piano. No... freaked... we would have freaked on the piano. Well... I would have made love. The thought lies heavy and sad in my mind. He has never made love to me... has he? It has always been freaking to him.

RICHARD C. MAST returns and hands me an envelope.

‘Peter got a decent price. It is a classic car. You can ask him. He’ll take you home.’ He nods in the direction over my shoulder. I turn... and Peter is standing in the doorway... wearing his suit... as impeccable as ever.

‘That’s fine… I can get myself home… thank you.’

I turn to stare at RICHARD C. MAST… and I see the barely… contained fury in his eyes.

‘Are you going to defy me at every turn?’

‘Why to change a habit of a lifetime?’ I give him a small… apologetic shrug.

He closes his eyes in frustration and runs his hand through his hair.

‘Please… Merry… let Peter take you home.’

‘I’ll get the car… Miss Merry…' Peter announces authoritatively. RICHARD C. MAST nods at him… and when I glance around… Peter has gone.

I turn back to face the RICHARD C. MAST. We are four feet apart. He steps forward…

-And-

Instinctively without conscious thought, I step back. He stops… and the anguish in his expression is palpable… his gray eyes burning.

‘I don’t want you to go…' he murmurs… his voice full of longing.

‘I can’t stay. I know what I want and you can’t give it to me... and I can’t give you what you need.’

He takes another step forward... and I hold up my hands.

‘Don’t... please.’ I recoil from him. There is no way I can tolerate his touch now... it will slay me. 'I can’t do this.’

Grabbing my suitcase and my backpack... I head for the foyer. He follows me... keeping a careful distance. He presses the elevator button... and the doors open. I climbed in.

‘Goodbye… RICHARD C. MAST…'

I murmur.

‘Merry… goodbye…' he says softly… and he looks utterly… utterly broken… a man in agonizing pain… reflecting how I feel inside. I tear my gaze away from him **before**- I change my mind and try to comfort him.

The elevator doors close… and it whisks me down to the bowels of the basement and my hell.

Peter holds the door open for me… and I climb into the back of the car. I avoid eye contact.

Embarrassment and shame wash over me. I am a complete failure.

I had hoped to drag my Dark Shadows into the light... but it has proved a task beyond my meager abilities. Desperately... I try to keep my emotions banked and at bay. As we head out onto 4th Avenue... I stare blankly out of the window... and the enormity of what I have done slowly washes over me. Shit... I have left him.

The only man I have ever loved. The only man I have ever slept with. I gasp... and the levees burst. Tears course unbidden and unwelcome down my

cheeks... and I wipe them away hurriedly with my fingers... scrambling in my bag for my sunglasses. As we pause at some traffic lights... Peter holds out a linen handkerchief for me. He says nothing and does not look in my direction... and I take it with gratitude.

'Thank you...' I mutter... and this small discreet act of kindness is my undoing. I sit back in the luxurious leather seats and weep.

The apartment is achingly empty and unfamiliar. I have not lived here long enough for it to feel like home. I head straight to my room... and there...

hanging limply at the end of my bed... is an incredibly sad... deflated helicopter balloon. Charlie Tango... looking and feeling exactly like me. I grab it angrily off my bedrail... snapping the tie... and hug it to me. Oh... what have I done?